

Critical Factors Influencing Classroom Participation in Online Learning

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Abstract: Efficiency and engagement are considered to be the most critical components of teaching and learning. Teachers have always strived to maximize student involvement and quality participation with the help of various teaching techniques and strategies. The purpose of this study was to explore the ongoing online learning process in language classes and find out ways to enhance student engagement in the process. Research methods: a questionnaire survey and observation were used to determine students' attitudes, expectations, and the level of involvement in online learning at Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University. The findings reveal the need to enhance student motivation. The research demonstrates that setting various authentic and interactive tasks with meaningful aims can significantly improve student focus. Additionally, incorporating social and emotional activities and providing teacher support and encouragement can facilitate student interaction and trigger an interest in lifelong learning.

Keywords: teaching strategies; student engagement; technology-enhanced learning; motivation; online learning



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1. Introduction

It is known that teaching and learning require active participation from teachers and students. Engagement is the key to creating lasting memories and making experiences in life more meaningful and impactful, and education is no exception. It is driven through interaction, in other words, “education with participation” [1]. In brief, the level of student engagement is a good measure of the likelihood that a learning process will be successful. Learners differ in how they can be engaged and motivated to learn. There are a variety of sources that can influence their level of interest, including culture, personal relevance, and background knowledge. Some learners are highly engaged by spontaneity and novelty, while others are disengaged. Some learners might like to work alone, while others prefer to work with their peers. Thus, there is no optimal way of learning that applies to all learners in all contexts. Providing multiple options for engagement is essential [2]. No doubt one of the most critical components of teaching is students' effective participation and boosting student engagement in the online educational process. The pandemic and the sudden shift to online learning in recent years have presented challenges and ambiguities in teaching. Teachers are struggling to maintain students' active participation and motivation in online classes. Educators are actively seeking ways to make the online teaching process more engaging and encouraging for students [2]. The present work aims to study the motivational factors that contribute to better student engagement and quality participation in the online learning process. We hypothesize that motivation is key to active student participation and interest in online classes, contributing to acquiring better learning skills.

2. Literature Review

Motivation is a state of mind that drives a person to perform things with spirit and positivity. It plays a crucial role in impacting students' choices, engagement, and achievements. Maintaining student motivation in remote classes in comparison with face-to-face studying can be challenging, which hinders the process of acquiring knowledge. Despite numerous theories of motivation presented over the past few decades, the expectancy–value theory has gained the most popularity [3]. The theory dates back to the 1950s and 1960s and was developed by John William Atkinson. In educational psychology, the expectancy–value theory is one of the most influential frameworks for investigating student motivation, learning behavior, and academic outcomes. According to the theory, encouraging students to find value in what they are learning can lead to higher quality performance and engagement in classes. Understanding the relevance of the learning material to their lives can boost students' interest in the subject studied. Expectancy describes whether the student expects to succeed. The term “value” refers to the extent to which a student considers a given task to be worthwhile and meaningful and the level of commitment, effort, and engagement they are likely to invest in completing it. Accordingly, if the student has low expectancy or perceives the material or topic as having minimal value, their motivation is likely to decrease. However, if the expectations are high, the motivation increases. Resourceful teachers will manage to help students relate their personal life and interests to the classwork, which can lead to an enhanced learning experience full of enthusiasm and passion. Students become intrinsically motivated to complete the tasks and see the beneficial outcomes, making them better learners. To foster intrinsic motivation, a growth mindset needs to be cultivated in students so that they notice their growing competence [4]. It is a known fact that language acquisition requires a lot of effort and time from learners to achieve success since it is a long journey accompanied by failures as well as accomplishments. On the way, many experience frustration and admit to being unable to master it. Throughout our experience, students at our university often feel they cannot handle the continuous process. As a result, poor performance prevents them from reaching their life goals, especially nowadays, when it is impossible to get ahead without knowing English well. Having become acquainted with the role of mindsets presented by a professor of psychology, Carol Dweck's “New Psychology for Success”, this negative attitude has been transformed and changed for the better [5]. She proved motivational factors to be more important than cognitive factors for success, claiming that students' behaviors are linked to their mindsets. After decades of studies and extensive evidence, she provided a new approach to success based on two predominant concepts, for which she coined the terms “growth mindset” vs. “fixed mindset” [6]. The theory of the two mindsets and the difference they make in outcomes is incredibly powerful. People with a growth mindset have a positive attitude toward learning and a belief that they can learn anything given enough time and well-directed effort. In contrast, people with a fixed mindset believe that talent is innate and unchangeable and are unwilling to take risks for fear of showing a lack of ability [4]. Moving from a fixed to a growth mindset can have a profound impact on students' learning ability and personal views since it makes them more motivated to face the challenges they experience when learning a foreign language [1].

Online learning has led to technology-enhanced instruction, which has become a common feature in education globally [7]. Being a novelty for many, it led to some speculation and uncertainty among teachers. However, integrating technology into the teaching/learning process has a myriad of benefits when performed through prior, thoughtful preparation, taking into account students' needs, interests, abilities, and perceptions [8].

We chose to implement the Universal Design for Learning approach, which provides numerous benefits to both teachers and students, including increased accessibility, personalized learning, higher engagement, improved learning outcomes, and preparation for the workforce. Universal Design for Learning emphasizes three principles for designing instruction that can be beneficial in technology-integrated learning to help guide teachers in reducing learning barriers for students: providing multiple means of engagement, action,

expression, and representation [9]. This approach organizes teaching into three components called networks that should be of prime importance for educators [10]. The Why of learning is the most effective dimension triggering interest and motivation, developing self-regulation to create purposeful and motivated learners. The What dimension includes background knowledge, visuals, information processing, and contextual understanding to create learners who are resourceful and knowledgeable [11]. The How of learning includes goal setting, planning, and strategies to create strategic and goal-oriented learners. Generally, in the online environment, teacher–student interactions are completely different, and many of the informal discussions and opportunities for sharing are rarely there, which can make learning a daunting experience. Thus, incorporating the abovementioned principles in online learning could be of great help.

UDL Strategies during Instruction [12]:

- Use more than one method for presenting the information. If teaching in a traditional lecture format, include slides or other visuals to support any auditory instruction. If using a visual diagram to demonstrate a concept, also include a written or audio description.
- Post or email slides in advance of each class. This allows students to focus on the auditory content and discussion in class, rather than trying to copy down information from a slide.
- Vary the pacing of lessons. Keep lessons moving but allow time for individual and group interaction with the content.
- Share notes. Ask a student to share a copy of their notes with the class. This is a great way to help students learn collaboratively and clear up misunderstandings in real time.
- Record your lectures and post the videos. This allows students to return to the lecture to clarify misunderstandings or missed content.

As technology is increasingly used in the educational process, it is becoming a more powerful tool for putting multiple intelligences to use. The purposeful and thoughtful association of technology and Gardner’s multiple intelligences theory can benefit both students and teachers throughout the learning process [13]. The theory of multiple intelligences was developed in 1983 by Dr. Howard Gardner, a professor of education at Harvard University [14]. It suggests that the traditional notion of intelligence based on I.Q. testing is far too limited. Instead, Dr. Gardner proposes eight different types of intelligence to account for a broader range of human potential in children and adults [15]. When Gardner published his multiple intelligences theory, many were in disagreement. Before the 1980s, the educational field believed that intelligence was determined at birth. Researchers used short-answer tests to assess one’s intelligence, and it was unheard of to assume that one’s cognitive capacity could grow [16]. The multiple intelligences theory states that it is to the benefit of both the student and the instructor if the student’s intelligence can be identified. Identifying a student’s intelligence allows the instructor to select appropriate activities for the student in the classroom and guide their learning journey more effectively [17].

It is known that learning and teaching are closely interrelated to psychological aspects. Psychologists working in the field of education study and examine how people study in a variety of settings to identify approaches and strategies to make learning more effective. Creating a welcoming environment using restorative practices and encouraging student voices ensures that all students get what they need. When students feel safe in the learning environment, they are more capable of learning [15]. Thus, we thought incorporating social–emotional learning (SEL) and its strategies into teaching and empowering students with life skills, such as decision-making, self-awareness, and self-regulation abilities, would be one of the solutions. Social–emotional learning is the process of developing and using the skill set we use to cope with feelings, set goals, make decisions, get along with others, and feel empathy. People with strong social–emotional skills are better equipped to manage daily challenges and build positive relationships [14]. SEL helps people to thrive in life and can be taught from preschool to adulthood [18]. Maurice Elias, a psychology professor

at Rutgers University and director of the university's Social–Emotional Learning Lab, describes SEL as a process through which we learn to recognize and manage emotions, care about stress, behave ethically and responsibly, develop positive relationships, and avoid negative behavior. It will help not only their personal development but their academic performance as well [18]. All this creates a culture in which students and teachers respect one another and enjoy being together, further strengthening relationships and motivating both students and teachers to do their best. SEL is widely used in teaching and would be great to incorporate into teaching and learning [19]. Educators need not carve out class time to explicitly teach empathy or collaboration; instead, opportunities should exist for students to practice those competencies in authentic and meaningful ways [20].

3. Research Methodology

The Expectancy–Value Theory Questionnaire (EVQ) is a tool used to measure an individual's expectancy and value beliefs related to a specific task or goal. It assesses an individual's perceptions of the task difficulty, their belief in their own ability to complete the task successfully, and their perceptions of the value of the task. The EVT theory and EVQ questionnaire have been extensively used in educational research to understand student motivation and achievement [10]. It has been found that students who have high expectancy beliefs and value a task highly are more likely to be motivated to pursue and succeed in that task. Conversely, students who lack confidence in their abilities or do not find the task valuable may be less motivated to pursue and succeed in it [3].

What makes students motivated in online language classes? To determine students' perceptions of motivation, the questionnaire survey was carried out at Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University using a qualitative method of research and the Expectancy–Value Theory Questionnaire as a research instrument. We conducted an online questionnaire for students enrolled in general English courses at the Faculty of Exact Sciences and Education. The students who participated in the study are second-year primary education students between the ages of 18 and 20. Their level of English varies from beginner to upper-intermediate. There were 73 students in total, with 80 per cent being female and 20 per cent male. The questionnaire contained five open-ended questions related to the activities in the classroom, teacher rapport, problems and ways of solving them, students' preferences, needs in learning, and the impact these factors have on enhancing students' motivation:

1. When learning English online, what motivates you to continue with the classes?
2. In your experience with online learning, do you feel that teacher support and encouragement positively impact your motivation?
3. Do the planned activities in your online classes align with your needs and interests, and do they contribute to your motivation to learn?
4. Can you identify any challenges or problems that you have faced during the online learning process that have negatively affected your motivation to continue?
5. Based on your experience with online learning, what improvements do you suggest to make the experience more efficient and engaging for learners?

The answers gained in the questionnaire helped us to assess the current situation in classrooms and find ways of enhancing motivation in students. Thus, after designing a questionnaire, we sent it to the students. Then, the responses were collected and analyzed. Thematic analysis was conducted to look closely at the data and find common themes, e.g., repeated ideas and topics. For each factor, the number of participants who selected it as a major factor in their motivation to attend classes was counted. The data were converted to percentages by dividing each count by the total number of participants who responded to the questionnaire and multiplying this by one hundred. The results after performing this procedure are presented in the table. The most crucial issues for increasing motivation are singled out.

Based on the data we obtained, we decided to use the observation method to gain a clearer picture of the online classes being conducted. Observation is a research method used to gather information about a particular phenomenon or behavior by carefully observing

and documenting it. It is a systematic and structured approach to data collection that involves observing and recording behavior in its natural setting, without manipulating any variables. This method is commonly used in the social sciences, psychology, anthropology, and education research.

There are different types of observation methods, including structured observation, unstructured observation, and systematic observation. Structured observation involves setting specific criteria for observing behavior and recording them in a predetermined format. Unstructured observation involves taking a more open-ended approach, where the researcher notes all relevant behaviors and interactions. Systematic observation involves the use of technology or instruments to measure and record specific behaviors or events [21].

In the second stage of research, we attended online language classes as complete observers to investigate the ongoing process and situation in the lessons. The observation was conducted in the same target groups. We watched the process, how students participated in the activities, if they were enthusiastic about getting involved in the process of learning, and how they managed to achieve the primary objectives of the lessons. Additionally, we observed teachers, strategies, and activities. Results were recorded, analyzed, and discussed with the help of content analysis method to identify and categorize observational data such as types of teacher behavior and student engagement [22]. As a result, major problems, challenges, and positive sides were classified.

4. Discussion and Results

Our primary research question was to determine the factors affecting student motivation in online language classes. Further, we tried to find the relationship between the students' perception of the quality learning process and motivation factors in our university. The survey aimed at studying students' views and evaluations of motivational factors in online classes. Namely, the first stage of the research was a survey conducted using open-ended questions that triggered frank, sincere answers. Then, we observed the language classes to reflect on and find the issues that increase motivation in students.

The findings of the questionnaire survey reveal weak areas, problem areas, and interesting suggestions for more engaging lessons. The answers were analyzed to gain a deeper understanding of participants' perceptions and motivations.

The given data present the results of the survey aimed at identifying the factors that contribute to students' motivation to attend classes. The survey-collected data from a sample of students and the findings are summarized as follows. About 71% of the survey participants mentioned that varied lesson types, strategies, and approaches make the lessons exciting. This indicates that the use of diverse teaching methods could enhance student engagement. Of all the students, 84% named the teacher's personality, enthusiasm, and sincere interest towards the learners as crucial factors in motivating them to attend classes. However, 16% of the participants did not consider teacher attitude to be crucial in motivating them. The data suggest that the quality of teacher–student interactions plays a significant role in student motivation. The answers to the questionnaire also highlight that there may be other factors that influence their motivation. A total of 39% of students mentioned that too much emphasis is placed on traditional teaching methods and routine activities, which may not be effective in motivating them. The activities are rarely related to real life. However, they feel more motivated to learn when topics are relevant to their interests and field of study. Altogether, 26% of the students stated a lack of teacher support, a feeling of isolation, and monotonous tasks as preventative factors in motivation. Another problem they named was incorporating digital tools to make learning more technology-friendly. They noted that not all teachers apply technology during the lessons. However, in an era of rapid technological advancements, educators must possess digital competence to effectively adapt to innovations in teaching. A total of 48% of the students indicated that applying modern technology, mobile apps, and educational games triggers interest and increases motivation in the lessons. This highlights the potential benefits of incorporating technology into the learning process to increase student motivation. In summary, the survey

results indicate that teachers' personalities and teaching methods, along with technology, play a significant role in motivating students to attend classes. Moreover, there seems to be a diversity of perspectives among students regarding what motivates them, and a combination of different teaching methods and approaches may be needed to cater to their needs.

Students' answers to the questions have been analyzed and are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Factors influencing student motivation based on participant responses.

Factors	Percentage of Participants
Question 1: Varied lesson types, different strategies, engaging tasks, positive atmosphere were named as the motivating factors.	71%
Questions 2: Teachers' attitudes not considered crucial	16%
Teachers' personality, enthusiasm, and sincere interest do have an impact on motivation.	84%
Question 3: The activities conducted sometimes are interesting and useful for real life but not always	39%
Question 4: Feeling isolated sometimes, lack of teacher support, monotonous tasks	26%
Question 5: Authentic tasks, modern technology, and educational games would enhance motivation	48%

In the second stage of the research, we observed language classes of the same students (5 groups comprising about 15 students each) and focused on certain factors affecting student motivation. The observation revealed that not all the teachers incorporate various strategies and activities to spark student interest and boost their involvement. Only two of them were using a diversity of engaging tasks and online tools to promote students' active participation. The second issue we found demotivating students was the lack of authenticity in the tasks. Just two teachers conducted role plays engaging with real-life issues. Students that engaged in discussions and debates were more involved than those that simply followed the tasks provided by the coursebooks.

Even though the abovementioned two teachers applied digital tools (Kahoot games and Mentimeter) to help students brainstorm, revise, and consolidate the material, we deduced that the activities lacked prior planning and proper preparation from the teachers. However, the online games and presentations added fun and interest to the lesson. To spread the positive examples of these teachers, we conducted a workshop for language center teachers at Batumi State University sharing teachers' positive and meaningful experiences in the classrooms.

According to the research carried out, especially in online learning, it is vital to have a highly motivated teacher equipped with digital competencies. That is why we are considering exploring the early acquisition of digital skills in children in future research. Despite the modern age being quite technologically driven, there are some places where people still face difficulties using technology [2]. For instance, in many rural areas of Georgia, students and teachers lack the abovementioned competencies. However, it is evident that a person who masters digital skills in childhood is able to apply technology more easily and effectively than those who lacked this opportunity.

5. Conclusions

As is widely known, motivation is a key factor in learning and online learning, as proved by its significance in increasing students' quality participation. The data collected by our research vividly show the following: students' high level of engagement is directly linked to applying a variety of meaningful tasks and real-life activities, teacher rapport, and digital literacy. In the questionnaire survey, students emphasized the significance of teacher support and encouragement during the lessons since the process of teaching requires patience, empathy, and prior preparation. Additionally, the importance of incorporating digital resources was put forward. Based on students' answers and the observations

conducted, it can be concluded that a teacher needs to be able to use digital platforms, which will contribute to promoting active student involvement and boosting their motivation and enthusiasm.

The paper provides important insights into how teachers who are transitioning to online teaching can adapt to the new environment and make online classes more engaging. One of the main implications of the paper is that teachers must be equipped with a variety of interactive activities and digital resources when designing online courses. However, while the insights provided by the paper are valuable, they are based on the authors' observations and experiences. Additionally, the paper only provides a few examples of effective teaching strategies, and there may be other strategies that could be equally or more effective.

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